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978-0-521-29502-4 - Peter Stein: Germany's Leading Theatre Director

Michael Patterson

Excerpt

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1 Exploring styles – Bond's *Saved*, Brecht's *In the Jungle of Cities* and Weiss's *Vietnam-Discourse*

“A new generation in the German theatre,” proclaimed the influential West German magazine *Theater heute*, as it awarded its annual accolade of “production of the year” to Peter Stein’s staging of Edward Bond’s *Saved* in Munich in 1967 (*Theater heute*, 1967/13, p. 57). It was Stein’s first professional production and it was “the most astonishing début of any director in the post-war German theatre” (Peter Iden, p. 17).

Stein had had no formal theatre training. Born in Berlin in 1937 the son of a senior industrial scientist, he grew up in the genteel surroundings of the spa-town of Bad Homburg near Frankfurt, where he passed his *Abitur* (school-leaving examination) in 1956. He spent eight years at Munich University (not an excessively long time by German standards), studying literature and fine art “without taking it very seriously.” Incapable, by his own admission, of completing a doctorate, he pursued the interest he had already discovered in his work with the student theatre by joining the Munich *Kammerspiele* in 1964.

His interest in theatre had developed both as spectator and participant. As theatre-goer he had “from 1960 onwards quite deliberately undertaken theatre trips within West Germany, to East Germany and in the whole of Europe” (personal communication, 18 October 1980). As the most important of these experiences he names the Berliner Ensemble production of Brecht’s *Arturo Ui*, Besson’s productions of Yevgeni Schwarz’s *The Dragon* and Molière’s *Tartuffe*, Strehler’s staging of Brecht’s *Galileo* in Milan and “the combined effect of different atmospheric impressions of the theatre in Paris at that time.”

His move into the professional theatre was gradual (personal communication, 18 October 1980):

As a student in Munich I acted in short films, trivial pieces for television (children’s programmes), I wrote film reviews and above all translated plays from French. From 1959 to 1962 I worked with the Munich student theatre (e.g. I played Heinrich Mann’s *Bibi* and in 1961 directed Musil’s *Vincent or the Friend of Important Men*. I then worked with Dieter Giesing as assistant director and *Dramaturg*, and when he joined the *Kammerspiele* as assistant

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director, I did free lance work as *Dramaturg* for the Kammerspiele and so eventually managed to get a job there.

The Kammerspiele, one of the major theatres of Munich, had a long tradition of experimentation. It was here that some of the first productions of Strindberg had taken place in Germany (1915 onwards), Brecht, himself a *Dramaturg* at the Kammerspiele, had had his first play performed (*Drums in the Night*, 1922) and had directed himself for the first time (*Edward II*, 1924). In the post-war period the Kammerspiele had again distinguished itself by being the first theatre to perform Dürrenmatt in West Germany and by numbering amongst its directors Fritz Kortner, the grand old man of German theatre. He had been a leading expressionist actor, had performed Brecht in the 1920s and had, as a Jew, been driven into exile by the Nazis.

As a director Kortner was characterized by his rejection of the crude posturing inherited from the Nazi theatre: "The lines were declaimed stiffly, ending with an outburst like a soldier reporting a message. Of course they had gestures: gestures with which they seized the fake sword that hung invisible on their belts" (*Theater heute*, 1970/13, p. 46). In place of these bad habits Kortner insisted on a careful critical reading of the text which was to inform the acting. As the Munich *Dramaturg* Ivan Nagel said of him: "he reads Shakespeare as though it were a sacred text which is to be utterly mistrusted precisely because it is sacred, which can only be appreciated and called into life by combining the deepest respect with the sharpest mistrust" (*Theater heute*, 1967/5, p. 7).

Stein admits that Kortner's influence on him was decisive, and, as we shall see, Kortner's recipe of mistrust and respect characterizes Stein's own theatrical explorations. In particular, Stein learnt from Kortner: precision, clarity, the importance of the word, close observation and untiring concern for detail.

Stein's appointment at the Kammerspiele was as *Dramaturg* and *Regieassistent*, literally "assistant director," but usually in fact in German theatres a very menial post, committing the occupant to perform the trivial tasks that the director cannot be troubled with. It was not until he had already directed *Saved* that Stein was attached to Kortner. "I hear you're a director too," said the older man to him suspiciously at their first meeting. Despite Kortner's geniality, work on his productions proved a hard schooling for Stein: he tells how he was once required to prepare a sound-tape which was to run for a few minutes. It turned out to be a task that took him several weeks,

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because Kortner repeatedly rejected different recordings. Such fastidiousness and such an uncompromising approach to all aspects of production were lessons that Stein would never forget.

It was in the spring of 1967 that Stein had been given the chance to direct on his own. The play that he chose, Bond's *Saved*, was to have a considerable influence on German playwriting, which until this date had been largely concerned with wider political issues (one thinks of Max Frisch's *Andorra*, Friedrich Dürrenmatt's *The Physicists* or Rolf Hochhuth's *The Representative*). The closest any contemporary German playwright had come to the domestic concerns of ordinary people had been in Martin Sperr's *Jagdscenen aus Niederbayern* (*Hunting Scenes from Lower Bavaria*), 1966, and it was with Sperr that Stein collaborated on a dialect version of *Saved* (*Gerettet*). Traditionally in the German theatre, dialect-plays had been associated with folksy comedies, although occasionally, as with Büchner, Hauptmann and Horváth, dialect had been used with more serious intent. Now, in the politically aware context of the late sixties the attempt was made to provide the proletariat with their own voice.

Of his decision to stage *Saved* Stein says: "With *Saved* I was aware of following in the tradition of the dialect *Volksstück*. I did not really regard this as a particularly new departure, since such plays have always been popular in Munich" (personal communication, 18 October 1980). The production, which opened on 15 April 1967, was the first performance of Bond in West Germany and the beginning of the many successes Bond has enjoyed on German-language stages, to the point that he is now professionally performed there with as much frequency as in Britain.

Martin Sperr's dialect version set out to transfer the original piece from its South London setting to a working-class area of Munich: "How can the theatre seize hold of reality today, if its characters speak a language which they never speak in reality?" queried Sperr (*Theater heute*, 1967/13, p. 74). He was pointing to a problem even more acute in Germany than in English-speaking nations; for German dialects are more akin to distinct languages. At the extreme, a Friesian would fail totally to understand a German-speaking Swiss. The critic Ernst Wendt reported that only 30–50 per cent of Sperr's text was intelligible to him, far less than he would have understood of a performance in French or English. The traditional recourse of playwrights has been to write in the literary language of High German and for actors to render this even more artificial by speaking the text in immaculate *Bühnendeutsch* (Stage German). The gain is supra-

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regional intelligibility; the loss is that the theatre creates a linguistic world of its own, unrelated to the world outside, separated from the lives of the people it is supposedly depicting.

In addition, the style of German actors is often remote from everyday behaviour. Despite the influence of directors like Kortner and the legacy of Brecht's performance style, most German acting would strike Anglo-Saxon audiences as being excessively formal and rhetorical. At its best, it is strongly and uncompromisingly theatrical; at its worst, it is bombastic and empty: a style "which preserves the superficialities, nonsensicalities and hollow emotionalism of expressionist theatre" (Henning Rischbieter, quoted in Daiber, pp. 117–18).

Significantly, Stanislavsky is not at all well known; at the time of writing there are no German editions of his writings in print, and the application of the famous Method is as rare in Germany as it is common in the United States. For this reason the natural and spontaneous style of the young actors in Stein's *Saved* seemed like a new discovery.

The use of dialect also imposed a valuable discipline on the cast: "it made it impossible for the actors to fall back on the acquired emotional and linguistic clichés of Stage German in their portrayal of the characters, and it soon proved to be a hurdle for each false expression and each false gesture" (*Theater heute*, 1967/13, p. 75). From the start, then, Stein was concerned with the primacy of language. Instead of working from preconceived images, he has consistently begun with the word, developing his theatrical treatment from a thoughtful analysis of the author's text.

For some of the cast, like Michael König (Len), who is still today one of Stein's leading actors, it was their first professional role. Pam was played by Jutta Schwarz, who had acted the part at the German-language première in Vienna the previous year, and Martin Sperr himself took the part of Barry. The playing was so natural that the style of the older actors playing Pam's parents seemed "stagey" in comparison.

Stein rehearsed the piece for eight weeks, which is fairly standard for German theatres. Because they had no other commitments, the cast worked in the evenings as well as during the day, so establishing the kind of intensive working schedule for which Stein is renowned. His basic approach was to challenge every expression and gesture to assess whether it was convincing and appropriate, what Stein was later to call "beginning from zero." By this means his cast reached the point where a gap no longer seemed to exist between the

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actor and the character portrayed. Far from merely acting themselves on stage, however, the actors by hard work and discipline passed through a stage of self-conscious exploration to a higher state of naturalness and so retained an impression of spontaneity while deliberately working to achieve particular effects. So, for example, Jutta Schwarz in Pam's climactic outburst in scene xi was embarrassingly convincing and yet her cries were repeated at the same pitch and rhythm at each performance. As Ivan Nagel commented (*Theater heute*, 1967/13, p. 75):

If Pam's despairing litany ("No 'ome. No friends. Baby dead. Gone. Fred gone.") had merely been an excellently performed theatrical "outburst" instead of the grinding weary and wearying lament of a being who is destroyed and yet insists on being in the right even in her ruin, in which character and actor could hardly be differentiated – then the audience would have been allowed the reassuring possibility of responding with theatre-emotions to the theatre-emotions of the actress.

The same desire to relate the events on stage to reality determined the visual style of the production. Stein and his designer, Jürgen Rose, rejected at an early stage a naturalistic setting, for stage realism in fact weaves an illusion about reality: instead of being confronted by the action on stage, the audience all too easily become mere voyeurs. The common alternative of German theatre, a stylishly abstract set, was also rejected ("the arty-crafty charms of a diluted aesthetic lightness in set-design and set-changes, hessian and bare wood under neon lighting," *ibid.*, p. 76). Instead, Stein and Rose adopted the solution, which derives from Brecht, of making the stage as real (as opposed to realistic) as possible. So, for example, the technical problem of creating the rowing-boat for scene ii was solved by using a real boat, cut off at water level, mounted on concealed rubber wheels and propelled by the actors' feet. A lake in a park cannot be realized on stage; a rowing-boat can.

Thus, while furniture and properties were real, no attempt was made to create the illusion of buildings, trees, and so on. Instead, the wide, shallow stage of the Werkraumtheater (Workshop theatre) of the Kammerspiele (9 m wide by 7½ m deep) was stripped entirely bare. The back of the stage, a 4½ m high wall, was painted in yellow, green, white and silver and was lit by a clearly visible ground row of different coloured lights. In the centre stood a juke-box which blared out pop music during the set-changes. The actors themselves changed the sets on an open stage by bringing on furniture and free-standing flats from the side of the stage where they remained in sight throughout.

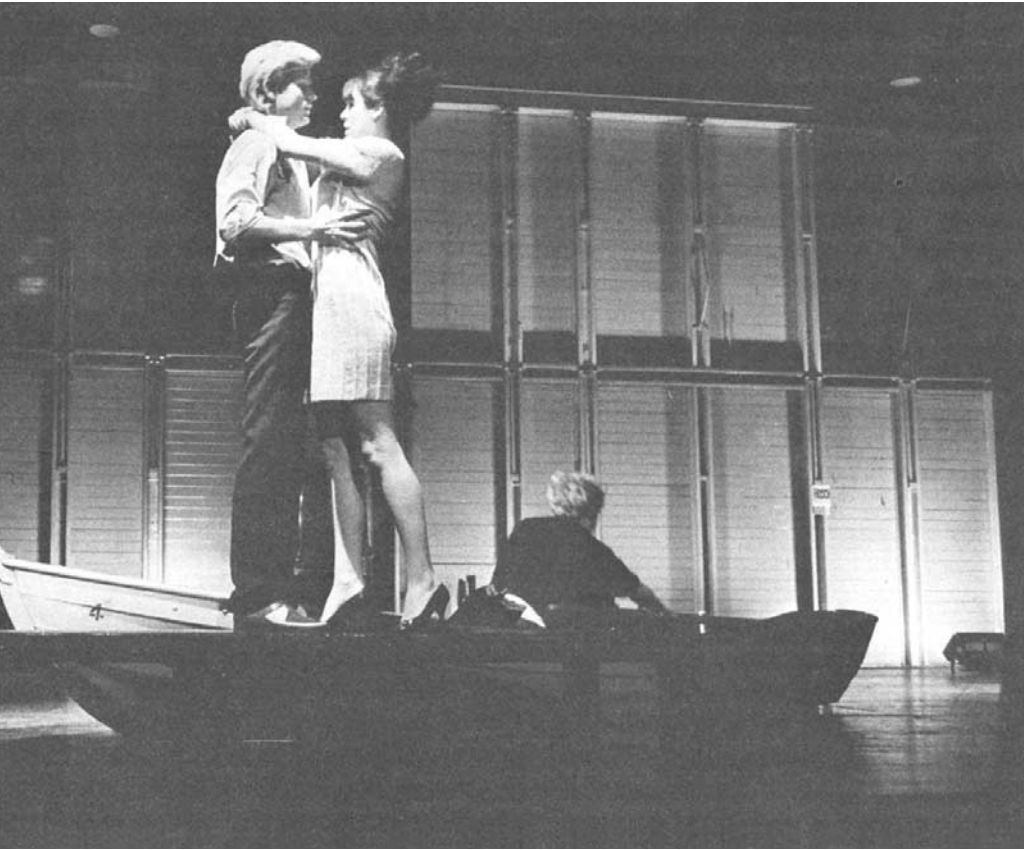
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1 *Bond's Saved*. Pam (Jutta Schwarz) embraces Fred (Christian Doermer) while Len (Michael König) rows the cut-off boat.

By these means the environment in which the play takes place was created with more conviction than any naturalistic setting would have achieved. The garishly illuminated background and raucous juke-box bombarded the audience with the cheap visual and aural stimuli to which the youths of the play are subjected. Rather than peering in at a way of life, the audience went some way towards actually experiencing it. Indeed, as in London, many of the Munich public rejected this direct confrontation with the violence of their society. The mother of Christian Doermer, the actor playing Fred, herself a well-established actress, walked out during the stoning of the baby, shouting, "I'm not going to put up with my son taking part in this filth."

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In Stein's first production, which was an immediate success with the critics if not always with the public, he not only displayed the promise that was to make him one of Germany's leading directors, he also already employed techniques which were to become his standard practice: a long intensive rehearsal period in which he and the cast could explore the text, the questioning of each superficial or hackneyed piece of acting, the insistence on the primacy of the word, the search for reality rather than realism, for clarity in place of mystification. Here, too, in Bond's *Saved*, which ends with an almost wordless scene, Stein first used what has become almost his trademark: an extended piece of silent action on stage. Stein's own summary of his first production could refer to all his work that follows: "Economy was the main requirement in the design and in the acting. Composure and clarity, the invitation to criticize determined the realization of the whole play" (*Theater heute*, 1967/13, p. 75.)

This statement might have come from Brecht, and clearly Stein, both directly and through his mentor Kortner, owes a great deal to

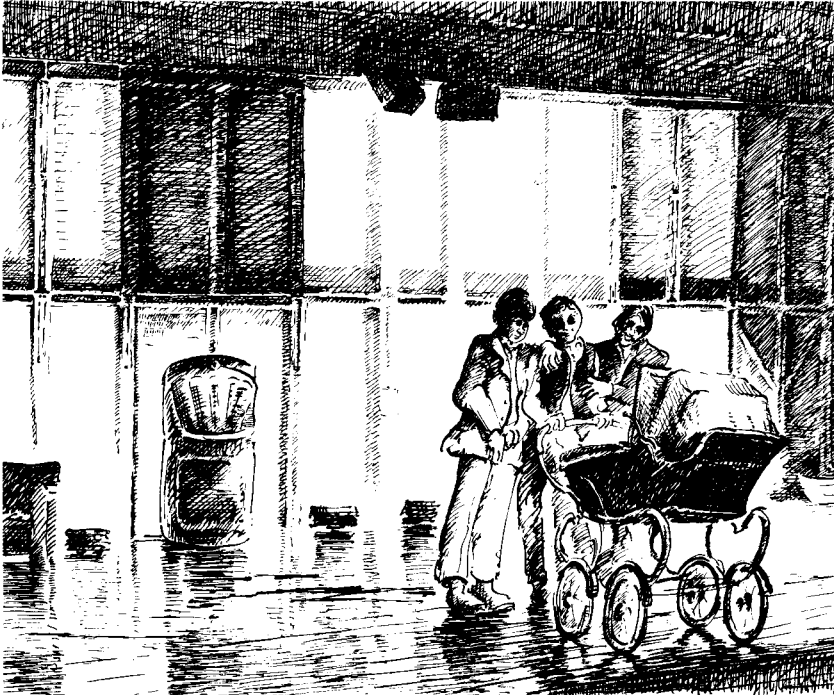


Fig. 1 Bond's *Saved*. The notorious baby-stoning scene, showing the bare stage with juke-box and furniture.

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Brecht's influence. The leading Brechtian actress Therese Giehse, whom Stein first met in Munich, regarded Stein as Brecht's true successor ("*Ich hab nichts zum Sagen,*" pp. 154–5 and 196):

Stein is simply the best. Nobody is on a par with him. If Stein knocks over a chair on stage, it is an event; if anyone else does it, then it's just a chair that gets knocked over. . . Stein is a great innovator and emulator: imaginative, honest, painstaking. . . He analyses a play exactly, pulls it apart, dissects it with incredible curiosity. Stein can be really curious. He tries to get to know a play completely. He clarifies the piece, peels off its different layers with all his curiosity and imagination, but he does not change it. The play is there, one has only to bring it alive. Stein does just that. And he is gentle. He slips into his own way of working, so that it is easy to feel at home in his directing style. Rehearsals are easy-going. There's quite a bit of laughter. That's good. You don't have to sweat with effort. Stein has much of the quality of Brecht and has the same way of working. . . As a director Stein is Brecht's immediate successor.

Like Brecht, Stein is an *Aufklärer*, a word related to our own "clear," meaning one who enlightens. Critical clarity is the keynote of the work of both men, not in some cold pseudo-scientific manner but with humour and warmth – a relentless but humble questioning of the world and the theatre that portrays that world.

The major point of divergence between the two directors is determined largely by their historical situation. Brecht spent most of his adult life locked in an ideological struggle against Fascism; Stein's adult life has been spent in the colossal wealth and stability of post-war West Germany. Brecht witnessed capitalism with its kid gloves off and felt bound to take sides vociferously; for Stein the violence of his society remains submerged, and the issues are much more complex. For this reason Stein feels much more at home with the early plays of Brecht than with the didactic tone of the *Lehrstücke*. As he said in an interview with Bernard Dort: "It all seems a bit simple, this mechanistic view of life, the perpetual dialectical motion which Brecht constantly used in his plays – though not so much in his early ones. That is why I prefer them and can hardly imagine what I could do with his later plays" (*Travail théâtral*, 1972, p. 30).

Thus it was that for his next production at the Kammerspiele he chose a little known early play by Brecht, *In the Jungle of Cities*. Begun in 1921 and premièred in Munich in 1923, it had starred Kortner when it transferred to Berlin the following year. It has never been popular, even in the German theatre: Stein's production, which opened on 9 March 1968 as part of the celebrations for Brecht's seventieth anniversary, was only the third professional post-war production of the play.

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"The Jungle of Cities" is the gangster world of Chicago in the early years of this century, and the play describes the bitter fight between a Malaysian timber merchant, Shlink, and a downtrodden migrant from the plains, Garga. Why this fight takes place is never explained, and Brecht urges the audience not to look for motives but to "concentrate only on the finish" (preface to the play). The style depends on a deliberate reversal of naturalistic expectations; instead of having past explanations for present behaviour gradually revealed in the manner of Ibsen, the play presents nothing but the process, just as the interest of a boxing-match, from which Brecht's piece takes its idiom, is not in why two men hit each other until one can no longer get up but in the way they conduct their struggle. In terms of ideology, this is perhaps the most nihilistic piece of Brecht's early amoral writing; there is no suggestion in the play that the mutual destructiveness of Shlink and Garga is caused by the contradictions of capitalism. On the contrary Shlink declares to them to be "comrades in a metaphysical undertaking."

On this production Stein worked for the first time with his regular designer, Karl-Ernst Herrmann. Once more the broad stage of the Werkraumtheater was stripped bare, and the action took place amid the hard functional setting of concrete and steel girders. To create different levels and to afford the possibility of simultaneous playing, wooden scaffolding was erected across the width of the stage, and the junk of the city was suggested by oildrums, crates, bottles and litter. On entering the auditorium, the audience were confronted with a film of a boxing-match projected on a screen at the front of the stage. This technique of silent action, typical of Stein's method, was repeated later on stage, when Shlink committed suicide. In Brecht the stage-direction merely says: "He collapses." In Stein's production, Hans Korte as Shlink draped a yellow cloth over himself, lit incense sticks, painted his face white and finally drank poison. Not only was this an extremely theatrical sequence, but it also clarified to some extent the mystery surrounding Shlink's determination to fight Garga to the end: Stein shows Shlink as seeking the ultimate experience of death. As Brecht said at the time of writing the play: "only where death is possible, is there the possibility of pleasure." Appropriately, then, Shlink turned his death into a ritual.

The moment was then suddenly broken by the arrival of a lynchmob, who pumped Shlink's convulsing body full of bullets, while numerous wooden planks clattered vertically onto the stage from above to form a kind of cage around Shlink's corpse. The final scene with Garga seizing Shlink's money was played as a conclusion of

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mock-triumph. Garga took the cash-box and climbed to the highest position on the scaffolding, where he received the homage of the rest of the cast. The exaggerated "happy end" threw into question the victory of Garga: in a society based on capitalist competition are there victors or perhaps only victims? It was to be the first of many ironic conclusions that Stein provided for his productions.

Garga was played by Bruno Ganz, who with Edith Clever had come from Bremen to work with Stein. Ganz played Garga with quiet determination and yet with complete physical involvement in the role. The simple directness of his playing, already characteristic of Stein's leading actors, was heightened by the gangster-style attitudinizing of Pavian and Wurm, the latter played by Dieter Laser, who in common with Ganz and Clever was to remain with Stein for several years.

Although *In the Jungle of Cities* had confirmed Stein as one of the most promising new talents in German theatre since the war and the production had been invited to the highly competitive and prestigious Berlin Theatre Festival in June 1968, his career in Munich was to meet an abrupt end. His next production, which opened on 5 July 1968 and which he co-directed with Wolfgang Schwiedrzik, Peter Weiss's *Vietnam-Discourse*, was performed for only three nights; and this was the last time that Stein was to work in the city that had been his home for almost a decade and a half.

Weiss's documentary about the involvement of the United States in Vietnam reveals its content in its full title, *Discourse on the Background and the Course of the Long-lasting War of Liberation in Viet Nam as an Example of the Necessity of Armed Struggle by the Oppressed against Their Oppressors as well as on Attempts of the United States of America to Destroy the Bases of Revolution*. Premiered in Frankfurt in March 1968, it was an intensely topical piece of agitprop theatre, presenting a naive but, given the urgency of the situation, justifiable account of imperialist aggression in Vietnam. Its techniques were those familiar from Piscator and the political revues of the 1920s – caricatured political figures, sometimes presented as puppets with large masks, model situations often performed in mime, and songs with a strong rhythmic beat.

The question that arises from the performance of a political piece like this in a municipal theatre such as the Munich Kammerspiele is: "for whom is this intended?" Since it was presented in the studio and not in the main auditorium and so did not form part of the season-ticket repertory, it was unlikely to attract those who supported US policy in Vietnam. Even if some enthusiast for the struggle of the